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ABSTRACT

Reading journals can help college readers successfully meet the demands of complex and sophisticated texts when students use them as a strategy for making meaning rather than simply extracting information. There are three primary reasons for using reading journals at the college level: (1) writing is a way of discovering when students are free to explore new ideas safely, seek patterns, and connect experiences in a journal; (2) writing is a form of learning when students connect their own experience with text content--hence, the journals are not a display of acquired learning but part of the process of exploring and rethinking ideas; and (3) writing can be used to monitor thinking and learning when the readers understand that they are negotiating meaning as they write in response to reading. Encouraging students to be relaxed about putting their thoughts down in a journal, and writing comments that are more probing and supportive than evaluative and judgmental can make students less apprehensive about writing. Assignments of four or five pages a week on a variety of reading material, and requiring students to use an acceptable bibliographic format can help prepare them for other academic coursework. Finally, assigning point rather than letter grades, modeling journal entries for the first couple weeks, and occasionally having students read their classmates' journals can make the journals seem safe places to explore. (Eighteen references are included.) (JC)

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The Reading Journal: A Bridge
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The reading journal: A bridge between reading and writing

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There has been a considerable amount of speculation and research recently on the connection between reading and writing in spite of the frequent practice of teaching them as separate disciplines. While research tends to support this connection (Atwell, 1980; Birnbaum, 1982; Stotsky, 1983) and common sense suggests a relationship between the two, developmental reading instructors rarely use journal writing as a way of promoting involvement and enhancing comprehension. When students write about their reading, they become aware of their reading habits, think creatively, verify their level of comprehension, organize their thoughts, and share their thinking with others. It seems, therefore, that since journals can serve such a variety of purposes utilizing a wide range of reading materials, their importance should not be overlooked.

In this article, we will provide a rationale for writing in response to reading, classify different kinds of journal assignments, and discuss how the reading journal can be evaluated and managed. Some of these suggestions for journal writing are modifications of suggestions from other practitioners; others are suggestions which come from our own experience of integrating the journal into the developmental reading classes which we teach.

The majority of students coming into our developmental reading program right out of high school typically have had few experiences in reading full-length books or any extended discourse. Their exposure to reading, if at all, has too often been reduced to the practice of isolated skills which are removed from meaningful context. Students have been conditioned to believe that meaning resides in the text to be discovered by the reader and judged "right" or "wrong" by the teacher. This view of reading implies that comprehension is simply information retrieval. Given this view, readers approach reading tasks passively, look for stated ideas, miss implied relationships, ignore the possibility of multiple meanings and fail to monitor their understanding with any sense of control. Their experience has convinced them that "they cannot be successful in controlling ideas either as interpreters of what they read, or generators of what they write" (Hjelmervik & Merriman, 1983). Our reading instruction has too often made skills an end in itself rather than a means for constructing meaning.

In order for college readers to successfully meet the demands of sophisticated and complex texts, they must have strategies for monitoring and adjusting their own reading behaviors, for understanding multiple meanings, and for seeing relationships which are implied. Learning in a college setting occurs primarily through the understanding of text by learners who are able to synthesize and evaluate new information at the same time they are integrating past experience with new understandings (Bradford, 1983; Chaplin, 1982; Kennedy, 1980). To accomplish this task in a reading program designed for these high risk freshmen is a challenge.

College reading programs which elect to use a variety of material such as content texts, news magazines, and paperbacks (Nist, Kirby and Ritter, 1983) should realize the importance of integrating writing into the reading curriculum. The journal writing, which we are advocating, does not take the place of the traditional composition course; rather, writing is incorporated

into the reading course where students are encouraged to respond to their reading in a variety of ways. We stress that the reading journal is not a diary which is a daily record of personal events or feelings. Rather it is a safe place for the student to practice expressing ideas which can be questioned, analyzed, and refined with little risk. In an environment where comma splices and subject-verb agreement are overlooked in favor of instructor response to students' written ideas, students have the opportunity to grow as readers and writers (Kirby and Liner, 1981).

A variety of articles over the past several years discuss a number of ways in which the journal or written response can be incorporated into and become an integral part of developmental reading programs for college freshmen (Blatt and Rosen, 1984; Hjelmervik and Merriman, 1983; Hoffman, 1983; Horton, 1982; Kennedy, 1980; Petrosky, 1982; Salvatori, 1983). Petrosky (1982) says that "writing about reading is one of the best ways to get students to unravel their transactions so that we can see how they understand and, in the process, help them learn to elaborate, clarify, and illustrate their responses by reference to the associations and prior knowledge that inform them" (p. 24). In other words, writing gives readers an opportunity to express and explain connections between their prior knowledge and texts which they read.

Rationale

We believe the power of pairing reading with writing maximizes the strength of each to help students see more clearly what they know, explore ideas which are new to them, and discover connections between things old and new. Asking students to write about their reading is really asking them to think about their reading. Once ideas about readings are written, they can be shared in class with the instructor or with a peer. Assumptions and interpretations can then be examined, questioned, and discussed. This kind of writing and sharing provides a window on that reader's thinking. At the same time, it builds a community of readers who learn to think about their reading and written responses. Thus, the act of writing becomes a way to monitor understanding of a text—a way to see what one knows. Writing about reading forces students out of passive involvement into an attitude of active participation.

Readers often go through the motions of reading a text and are surprised and frustrated when they discover their understanding is incomplete or confused. Recently, one of our students was asked to write a summary of a sociology selection on the topic, family structure. His comment was, "I thought I understood what I was reading until I had to write about it. When I started writing, I found out that I had really understood very little." Writing in response to reading provided this student a window to view his own understanding; he became aware of his inadequate reading behaviors only after he tried to write about his understanding.

Supported by our observations of using the reading journal for a number of years and the research on reading/writing relationships, we think there are three reasons why reading journals are invaluable for growing readers.

1) *Writing is discovering.* Readers can use their journals to explore, reflect, discover what they know and feel. Horton (1982) says that, "writing is what allows you to hold onto one idea while you go off and explore some idea that a small, nagging voice in the back of your mind tells you might be related to it" (p. 2). In other words, we find out how and what we think in the act of writing. Just as with talking, writing is a way to represent experience, to explore ideas, to question, to untangle the questions around us. The mind is a

pattern seeker: it seeks to see wholes, to put pieces together, to connect experiences, to make sense of what's happening. The reading journal helps a student explore ideas and opinions in a low risk, non-judgmental place.

2) *Writing is learning.* Readers learn to make connections between their own experience and ideas in the text, as well as make connections between ideas within a text. Smith (1981) explains that writing separates our ideas from ourselves in a way that is easiest for us to examine, explore, and develop. We have a chance to rethink, reshape, refine the thoughts we have put down on paper. In reading journals, writing becomes a tool for learning rather than a means to display acquired knowledge. What we learn through writing can then give us more to write about.

3) *Writing is monitoring thinking and learning.* Readers who are frequently asked to write about their reading will gain a sense of self-knowledge concerning their reading effectiveness. Tierney and Pearson (1983) say that when readers and writers compose meaning, they negotiate its meaning with what Murray (1982) calls the other self—that inner reader who continually reacts to what the writer is writing or what the reader is reading. This negotiation of meaning is a monitoring activity which gives the reader more control over the process. Reading journals encourage readers to become reflective about and adjust their reading strategies when they are unsuccessful with academic tasks.

For students who have involved themselves reluctantly or passively in becoming flexible and successful readers, the enticement of opening a dialogue between themselves and other readers by keeping a reading journal is hard to resist. We ask students to try a variety of journal responses as they are reading several assigned materials on a weekly basis: a paperback, *Newsweek* magazine, and a full length college textbook chapter. The reading journal suggestions which follow have worked for us with a wide range of materials and student ability and adapt easily to middle school students through college readers. Each type of reading journal focuses on different purposes and can be used simultaneously with other journal writing throughout the reading course.

Classification of Reading Journals

Writing for discovering. The *response journal* helps readers discover what they know, reflect on their understanding and opinions, and make connections to previous experiences. Petrosky (1982) suggests using Bleich's heuristic for writing responses (1978) which is a three part response for getting readers to think about their perceptions of text: 1) What does the text say? 2) What do I feel or think about it? 3) How do these ideas or feelings inform or follow what I already know? Early in our reading courses, we ask students to write three paragraphs which follow variations of this format. Their first written responses may seem stiff and perfunctory but they soon become more relaxed and spontaneous in their attempts to share their own unique understandings. Finding out that instructors are truly interested in what they write rather than how they write, students quickly grow in their confidence and ability to respond honestly and thoughtfully to what they read.

Other suggestions for the response journal include sentence starters, such as: "This was an important book/article to read because . . .", or "The writer seemed to be biased in his view because . . .", or "The strongest image, idea, event in this reading—to me—is . . ." Another suggestion for use with paperbacks is to ask students to write about which character they relate to most and why. With controversial topics, students can write an "agree/-

disagree" response and explore their opinions. Writing stimuli such as these help readers untangle the questions around them and explore the ways in which their experiences relate to new ideas.

An excerpt from a student's response journal about the book *Hiroshima* is, "I feel the book was frightening and also sad. I never knew about the bomb until I read the book. The description of the city and injured people made a vivid picture in my mind that I can't erase. What if something like that happened over in this country?" And another student wrote her response to a *Newsweek* article about a prisoner who claimed his innocence: "It makes me wonder about people who are supposed to keep the justice. This sorry state-of-affairs exists because too many judges are unwilling to apply the law and pursue truth. I can't get this article out of my mind even though we read it two weeks ago." Response journals by students who confess previous reluctance and avoidance of any reading habit show just how much they become involved by the excitement of expressing their own perceptions.

Writing for learning. The *text-to-meaning journal* focuses more directly on what is in the text and how the reader is processing meaning. With numerous texts, simply understanding the stated ideas is a difficult task for some readers. Giving students strategies to help them understand texts is one way to develop more effective readers. For this kind of written response, we suggest a double entry journal which provides the place for copied excerpts from a text on one column and the reader's understanding of those excerpts in a second column. Dividing a notebook page in two columns and using this format works particularly well with textbook chapters, essays, or articles. Students begin to wrestle with the language of textbooks and find ways to approach large tasks with a sampling of excerpts they can successfully understand.

An example of the double-entry journal shows a student trying to understand some psychology textbook language and connect it to her prior knowledge:

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... "short term memory (STM) fades in less than half a minute if not renewed. Long term memory (LTM) stores info indefinitely to be used over & over again." p.178

Response

I'm baffled if STM stays only 15 secs & LTM stays with me forever, then what about the info that I can remember for maybe a year & then forget. What category is that under??

Other suggestions for text-to-meaning journals include choosing a quote from a paperback or article and asking students to discuss their interpretations of the quote. Also, asking the student to start with "When the author said _____, I think he/she meant _____." Getting students to share their interpretations of quotes can help them understand the possibility of multiple meanings from the same text. Readers must be challenged to seek varied interpretations and to stretch their processes for creating meaning. These text-to-meaning journals are an effective way to help students prepare for tests, anticipate test items, and gain experience writing their ideas about the texts.

Writing for monitoring. The *process journal* is the third category of written responses to reading. Writing about the students' own reading process is a helpful strategy for learning to control various reading tasks and for becoming a better monitor of one's own learning. Also, asking students to look closely at their study strategies (or lack of strategies) and to make connections to the consequences of those strategies helps students assume responsibility for their own academic performance (Hoffman, 1983). Students

have several options with this kind of reading journal with variation in the focus. 1) Reading process: What happens when I read? What about the vocabulary difficulty, length, rate, understanding, concentration, or interest? How do these things affect my success? 2) Academic behaviors: What academic behaviors am I using now and what kind of results do I get from those behaviors? What are some academic behaviors I observe of students around me and the consequences of those behaviors? 3) Exam preparation: What strategies helped or didn't help prepare me in taking an exam? Did I distribute my study time over several days or cram the night before? How can I improve my preparation for the next exam? 4) Adjustment to the academic environment: Do I see changes in my reading/study abilities when I look back at the beginning of this year? Am I using more strategies effectively now for becoming an independent learner? How am I fitting into the college academic environment?

An excerpt from a student's process journal shows how students begin seeing themselves as actively engaged in their own learning—a result of reading, writing, and thinking. "After struggling through a 30-page psychology chapter, I can see how the writing involved in the study strategies cause me to think even more about what I had read. I was forced to see the relationship between concepts presented in the chapter. I can see more clearly what I have to learn. Writing just gives me another way to learn text material, and it really works." And another student honestly writes: "Last week I was kind of slack in this class. I did most of the work but my mind was some where else during class. I guess that's why I got a D on that Friday quiz . . ." Asking students to reflect on the reading and learning processes they are experimenting with is just another way to help them develop a sense of control and independence with academic tasks.

Evaluation/Management

When we assign the journal at the beginning of the course, we model the process by writing several responses which we hand out to the students. We tell them how reading makes us think, and how writing about it helps us see more clearly what we know and think. Our sample responses model active questioning, risk-taking, and personal involvement with the particular readings. For the first few weeks that students write journal responses, we carefully monitor their ease or difficulty with expressing thoughtful reactions and insights. Because every reader will see different things in a reading text, we encourage students to be relaxed about putting their thoughts in writing. Our written comments back to them are meant to be probing and supportive rather than judgmental or evaluative.

Frequency and length of journal responses can vary according to the assigned readings or the instructor's monitoring of the students' involvement. We typically assign four to five pages per week which are either on specific readings or are the students' choice. When these responses are based on readings, we require students to use an acceptable bibliographic format for the source of reading; we model and teach this format in an attempt to prepare students for other academic coursework. In responding to a student's journal, we use marginal comments and a simple point assessment rather than letter grades.

In this way, students do not feel threatened by letter grades and the journal remains a safe place to experiment with expressing thoughts in writing. Points are based on involvement, thoughtfulness, and completeness. Journals are usually collected and read once a week although some variations on this can reduce the management problem if instructors carry large classloads. Students can select one entry out of the four or five to be read that

week; or students can exchange journals with a peer in the class on a bi-weekly basis, alternating with the instructor reading the journal. When students read other students' journals, we expect them to write the same kind of supportive, "listening" comments that the instructor writes for feedback. The key here is connecting the writer to an audience—a real listener who responds with ideas and opinions—whether it is an instructor or a peer.

Summary

While students are often initially reluctant to write about their reading, their hesitancy wanes as the term progresses. They become comfortable with responding, processing meaning, and monitoring their understanding through their journals. Naturally, some students connect reading and writing better than others. However, we have yet to find a student who has not made some growth in reading, writing, and thinking as a result of the journal. We think it is an excellent way to pull reluctant developmental students into the community of readers and writers.

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